

Two Cultural Experiences
Model Student
Humanities 1502
Dr. Doug Davis
1826 Words

With the Alwan Arab Music Ensemble. New Sounds Program #3265. Host John Schaefer.
Prod. Caryn Havlik. WNYC. Live, 2 November 2011.

The Taming of the Shrew. By William Shakespeare. Dir. Jeffrey Watkins. The New American
Shakespeare Tavern, Atlanta, Georgia. 8 March 2014.

Category A: Music

Summary

New Sounds show #3265 highlights music of the Arab world. The main guests were the Alwan Arab Music Ensemble who played “live” at the New York City Public Radio Station. Alwan is Arabic for “colors” which represents the ensembles musical purpose to blend their different Middle Eastern cultural traditions to create new music. The classical and traditional sounds of Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey are synthesized into a fresh musical style. The ensemble of Arab Americans uses Middle Eastern instruments such as the oud, buzuq, riqq, qanun, and santur to create their distinctive Arabian music. The end of the New Sounds show featured a 1991 recording of Abed Azrie singing two Middle Eastern songs.

Much Arabian music has a maqam, a single melodic line around which all of the other instruments and vocals flow, so each of the selections had this distinction. Improvisation of vocals and instruments whirled around the main central melody. The piece “Samaii Rast-Ya-Shadi al-Alhan” was a fun, upbeat work with each instrument taking turns at playing “center stage” with the melody. The music felt full and alive as the various instruments competed for their time to shine. Chant like voices entered the piece with the voices rising and falling in unison with the instruments to enhance the melody. The second selection, “Awedi Ayni” meaning “My Eyes Got Used to Seeing You,” continued the use of maqam with the singer and instruments moving up and down with higher and lower notes together resulting in a heartfelt and romantic mood. The instruments would retreat at intervals to give

the singer time to entreat his love, then swoop into the score for dramatic effect. The third selection, “Foug il-Nakhi” had two translations “Above Palm Trees” or “I Have a Friend Waiting Over Us.” The spokesperson stressed this selection could be heard as “poetry” to music, or as a mystical experience. The selection began quickly then the tempo slowed until the listener was drawn into the soft vocals accompanied by few instruments to produce a reflective sound. Towards the end of the song the tempo and instruments beat faster with a cheerful intensity accompanied by the singer who sounds joyful. Other voices join in as the song winds down to create a sense of celebration. The final two selections were recordings of Abed Azri singing “Murmur of the Breeze” and “Laughing.” These selections focused more on the vocalizations of the Arabic singer than demonstrating the creative power of the instruments.

Evaluation

When I listened to the selections, it reminded me of Baroque Era music. Although the music sounded foreign to me because of the Arabian style instruments, I could pick out a distinctive melody being played repeatedly. Each instrument was highlighted playing the same melody in various ways. The exotic instruments wove in and out of each other dancing around the melody. The use of one melodic line gave the artists singing and using instruments the opportunity to improvise the music. The music felt free and rhythmic, but with a core theme holding the form together. The use of percussion kept me drawn into the power of emotions driving each song toward its conclusion. I enjoyed how the instruments and vocals worked in harmony together to set the mood.

I enjoyed listening to the Middle Eastern music. The different types of sounds generated from the traditional Middle Eastern instruments was a nice change. I found the Middle Eastern music drew me into a “romantic” and “other worldly” realm where my imagination could escape into exotic sights and sounds. The faster rhythms and melodies encouraged me to move and dance, while the slower, more reflective pieces made me yearn for meditation and reflection. I believe not knowing the words added to my ability to “chase” where my imagination took me. I could feel the music and create my

own story.

Category C: Drama

Summary

The New American Shakespeare's Tavern in Atlanta, Georgia held a performance of William Shakespeare's, *The Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy he wrote around 1592 during the High Renaissance Period. The theater itself is not large. A small stage with a set that looks like the exterior of a house stands before a group of tables where the audience sits. Behind this is a balcony. I was seated in the ground seats very close to the stage; the performers, dressed in period costume, were often mere feet away from me. Before the play everyone gets a meal and drinks, which they continue to enjoy as the play opens. The play's plot revolved around Katerina, an unruly daughter, who must be married before her younger sister, Bianca, can be married. When Petruchio comes to town seeking a wealthy bride, the suitors convince him to choose Katerina. Katerina's father, Baptista, is thrilled to be rid of his cantankerous daughter. Petruchio uses psychology to "tame" Katerina. He is loud, obnoxious, and crude to demonstrate how her nasty behavior impacts others. After a peculiar wedding day Petruchio takes her home where she is denied comforts such as meat, rest, and clothing under the guise Petruchio wanted only the best for Katerina or she will have nothing. These deprivations psychologically challenge Katerina who realizes bowing to the will of her husband, even when he is wrong, gains peace and stability. She proclaims the sun is the moon to please him. In the final scene a wager is set forth to determine who has the most obedient wife. Two wives refuse a husbandly summons, but Katerina comes immediately when "commanded" by Petruchio. Katerina's appearance wins the wager. Finally, Katerina speaks to the other wives about recognizing their duty to respect their husbands. She discusses how as the weaker sex they need to submit to their husbands whose role will be to care for them and in turn peace will reign within their homes.

Evaluation

The evening spent in the tavern was a delight. The ambiance of the setting was fabulous. With

the cross beams on the wall, dark lighting, and slow guitar strumming in the background I felt transported back in time to the days of yore. My anticipation began to build as I enjoyed my delicious British Pub style meal.

I was impressed with the talented actors whose ability to transform into different characters was seamless. My favorite performer was J. Tony Brown who acted as Gremio as well as a servant and a tailor. As Gremio he would stick out his tongue in intervals and use a hilarious, high pitched squeal when discussing his passion for Bianca. The speed the dialogue was delivered was rapid. I understood most of the action, but there were times when I felt lost and wondered why the audience was laughing. The performers made gestures with hands or used fun facial expressions meant to draw the “groundlings” into the performance. The actors also would weave in and out of the crowd as they entered and exited the stage to enhance the audiences feel of being a participant in the unfolding events. What really grabbed me during the play was how much more I could understand the script by watching the actors infuse the word on the page with their over the top antics and character interactions. The actors knew their comedic roles by playing to the audience with funny walks, squeaking cod pieces, and funny disguises. I understood better than before the appeal of Shakespeare for people now and in the High Renaissance. While his plays are superbly crafted examinations of humanity, they are also fun entertainment!

The play was an interesting look at the “battle of the sexes” and gender stereotypes. The different story lines were compelling. Which suitor would Bianca chose? How would they work out the various intrigues and subplots? Why did Katerina ultimately agree to marry Petruchio? Why did his unorthodox methods work? Was Katerina really tamed? Has Katerina tamed Petruchio as well? We know Bianca chooses Lucentio, but none of the other questions are given a straight answer. I was left to contemplate them. I chose to believe that Katerina was thankful Petruchio wanted her, not her sister. He enjoyed her feisty intelligence. Petruchio shows he trusts her when he asks her to tell the other wives how they should behave toward their husbands. I believe Katerina still knows her own

mind, but wants to please her husband because he has gained her respect and loyalty. Petruchio has been tamed by her because of his admiration for her strength. Overall, the play was a fun way to examine how we treat our spouse as well as friends and family.

Compare and Contrast:

As a busy mother of two little girls, I rarely take the time to enjoy anything more complicated than *My Little Pony* these days. The cultural experiences report gave me the catalyst I needed to enjoy some quality time for me! Taking the time to expand my mind with something of real substance has been wonderful. I realize I need to do this far more often because not only is it important to the development of myself as a person, but new cultural experiences are fun.

Each of the experiences gave me the opportunity to explore spiritual and psychological ideas which unite both families and humanity as a whole. The hardest category for me to pick was the music. I tried to listen to some cathedral music and Scottish folk songs before stumbling onto the Alwan Arab Ensemble on New Sounds. The music was fun, uplifting, and spiritual. Here was something I wanted to listen to for an hour. Although spiritual in nature, the music had fast rhythms and varying tempos which kept my mind entertained. I was reminded of how people of different cultures and religions all use music as the universal language of romance and spirituality. My second experience which was at the tavern was my favorite because I was fully immersed in the experience from the setting to being a “groundling” in the theater. *The Taming of Shrew* managed to be a successful comedy, while challenging me to think about the dynamics in my own marriage. I think a person could chose to view the end as a defeat for Katerina and womankind, but I decided to view the end of the play through the prism of my own successful marriage. I believe Shakespeare was attempting to encourage people everywhere to use mutual respect and compromise in marriage. While each of the experiences was rewarding, the most surprising part of the exercise was to discover how each seemed to point back to our relationships with each other and sometimes even to God.

